Richard Eckersley on progress

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Politics and progress

Richard Eckersley

In a 2009 ANU Poll, 70 per cent of Australians said they were satisfied with 'the way the country is heading', but only 24 per cent thought quality of life in Australia was getting better. The first question, asked in each poll, is essentially political (at the time, the Federal Government's stocks were high). The second question, included in this poll at my request, is more sociological. Yet it can also have profound political ramifications: when people feel pessimistic, they can become quickly disappointed with governments; politics becomes more volatile.

Yet political debate and commentary rarely address this bigger question about progress. That life is getting better is widely assumed, and discussion focuses on personalities, performances and policies in a much more restricted and specific way. If the 'deep current' of progress - and not just its surface swirls and eddies - was more widely recognised and part of the political debate, there would be more incentive for governments to respond to what it means for policy.

Incorporating depth into the political debate is critical. While my take on progress is admittedly unorthodox, I believe there is growing evidence that the social trajectory of people's health and wellbeing – of our quality of life – is now downwards. By 'social' I mean health and wellbeing, broadly defined, as determined by social conditions (so notionally setting aside the offsetting benefits of medical advances and other health interventions). In other words, the net effect of social changes (including economic, cultural and environmental) is negative – it's making life worse.

This development is being overlooked for two main reasons. First, health professions, politicians and the public alike have been conditioned to think of health as a property of individuals and a matter of healthcare interventions and personal lifestyle choices. Secondly, governments find even this context challenging enough as they struggle with rising demand and costs; trying to reconcile existing wealth-based political priorities with emerging health-based social realities is much more difficult.

The implications of this downward social trajectory are huge, so huge that, as a society, we avoid scrutinising them.

The situation is reflected most clearly in the health and wellbeing of young people, who best reflect the times by virtue of growing up in them. Rather than taking the prize when it comes to material progress as we pursue it, they are paying the price. This price goes beyond the future impacts of climate change and other threats. It is not a question of discounting future costs against present benefits; the price is already being paid. If young people's health and wellbeing are not improving, it is hard to argue that life overall is getting better.

Rising rates of diabetes and other health risks associated with increasing obesity have led to suggestions that, barring new medical interventions, their life expectancy will fall. Just as alarming are the statistics on mental illness, which appears to have increased, perhaps dramatically, over several generations, and accounts for by far the biggest share – almost a half - of the burden of disease in those aged 16-24. Recent research suggests a majority of young people (or close to it) now experience one or more episodes of one or more mental disorders by their mid-twenties, and this affects their later income and employment prospects and potential.

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The research also shows that the reasons for these patterns and trends are not primarily economic; they are cultural. In other words, they are not defined by material disadvantage and 'disengagement' from education and work, as governments and many others like to insist. Indeed, the problem may be more one of 'over-engagement', arising from the increasing pressures and competition to be a winner in today's society. Melbourne University hosted in August a national summit on the mental health of tertiary students because of a common perception that counselling services are seeing more, and more severe, mental illness among students.

These pressures of modern consumer society go much further than the manufactured desire to 'have more stuff'. A cultural focus on the external trappings of 'the good life' increases the pressures to meet high, even unrealistic, expectations, and so heightens the risks of failure and disappointment. It leads to an unrelenting need to make the most of our lives, to fashion identity and meaning increasingly from personal achievements, activities, possessions and 'lifestyles', and less from stable, shared cultural traditions and beliefs.

Of particular concern is that children are being exposed to these pressures - to be popular, look good, do well, and follow the latest fashions – at an ever younger age. Recent revelations about the sexualisation, 'adultification' and commodification of childhood are disturbing. As a society, we are sacrificing the health and wellbeing of our children to commercial and economic interests; like the Greek god, Cronus, we are eating our own children to preserve the status quo.

Politics has simply not come to grips with this emerging social reality. Improving the measures and models of progress could help to change this situation. Ideally, it would change our politics.

Richard Eckersley is a member of the expert reference group for ABS's 'Measures of Australia's Progress' project, and a director of Australia21, a non-profit research company. *www.richardeckersley.com.au* *. This piece has been adapted from an opinion piece, 'In search of a deeper politics', published in The Canberra Times on 16 September.*

The views expressed in this opinion piece are the personal views of the individuals concerned and they do not represent the views of the ABS. The intention of this opinion piece is to generate debate and discussion about how Australians view progress. These views will assist the ABS in measuring progress in the future. The ABS continues to be independent and objective.

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